

ASPECTS OF THE MEDIAN SPACE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN JUDAISM AND EASTERN CHRISTIANITY

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1. Median space as the medium of symbolisation

Religious experience requires our starting from a polarity of the sacred as transcendent (Absolute) and transcendental. We make this clear because we wish to delimit us from the philosophical views which start from the premise that the sacred is a transcendental structure. For example, we can understand from Mircea Eliade's studies that, from the general perspective of religions, the sacred cannot be known in itself or as a unique, basic structure, but it can only be known in its manifestations (hierophanies, cratophanies). These are projections through which the sacred appears in the limited intellectual categories of the human mind and in forms adequate for the action of the human being led by an overflowing wish towards concreteness.¹ This view is promoted in Romanian philosophy by Aurel Codoban, who shows that “the sacred which cannot go beyond religious experience refers to the Absolute, but only to Absolute as a mystery. The whole phenomenology of mystery seems to be revealed on the level of religious experience: the ontology of the secret, the cipher of Transcendence, mask, etc. Mystery separates the Sacred from the Absolute more than anything else... In terms of this distinction the function of the Sacred as compared to the Absolute appears in a different light. In terms of the mystery within

¹ Mircea Eliade, *Tratat de istorie a religiilor (Treatise on the History of Religions)*, Editura Humanitas, Bucureşti, 1992

it, religious experience seems to be the attempt to surpass every human experience.”¹

However, mystery in our view is the mystery of a relation. Moreover, theorizing a transcendent sacred and a transcendental sacred compels us to resist the temptation of presenting religious experience in terms of a knowledge which makes use only of the structures of a restrained rationality. We must formulate the mystery of the manifestation of the absolute in terms of the median space of religious experience which is the relational space of a symbolic knowledge built on revelational data and the imaginative activity of man. All the above forms of knowledge unfold within the limiting frames of the symbolic thinking of the religious man. Even knowledge above knowledge expressed as mystical union with the Divinity is tributary to the imaginative content of the *homo religiosus*.

Otherwise the symbolic activity of man is linked not only to the *par excellence* religious nature of the human being, but also to the specific mode of the human being to place itself in the fabric of being, as the philosophy of culture proves it. Ernst Cassirer points out that unlike other creatures, man adapts to the surroundings in a new manner, namely, through the symbolic system which is built or accepted by him and which reveals him a new dimension of reality. Man no longer lives in a purely physical universe, but in a symbolic universe². We tried to present this universe as a product of the religious individual *par excellence*. However, we do not wish to analyse a series of disparate symbols but we are interested in the fabric of religious deeds which institutes the median space and is proliferated in its turn by this space.

Language is the product of an intentional (religious) conscience. On account of the relationship between conscience and

¹ Aurel Codoban, *Conceptul de sacru (The Concept of the Sacred)*, in: Steaua, nr.1-2/1994, p.42, see also *Sacru și ontofanie. Pentru o nouă filosofie a religiilor (The Sacred and Ontophany. Towards a New Philosophy of Religions)*, ed. cit., p.73.

² Ernst Cassirer, *Eseu despre om. O introducere în filosofia culturii umane (Essay on Man. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Culture)*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 1994, p.43.

language the first legitimises the openings of language but hides a mystery at the same time. This consciousness extrapolated to the level of the divinity makes us face a being which presents itself through the symbolic language of religious experience but keeps a postponed content of the hidden divine conscience. Unknowability always belongs to a conscience manifested in an accessible language which always implies a second step towards the inaccessible within the dialectics of the being of conscience as well as the dialectics of religious being. This “come and go” of accessibility and inaccessibility endows religious experience with an intentionality and intensesness, whether it is a numinous experience or a symbolic experience of the onto-theological void. The cognizable – non-cognizable structure may seem to the modern man to correspond to a psychism modelled on the conscious-unconscious structure extrapolated to the realm of the transcendent. However, rethinking the forementioned structure from the perspective of archaic communities, we can observe that it becomes accessible through experience, meditation and adaptation to the consequences of our life in a personal system of assuming the ritualisation of life.

Experience leads to a configuration even though an indirect and vaguely symbolic one. When we judge these structures in the perspective of a “language-conscience”¹ we always have in view the dialogic nature of the word. It is not accidental that God has been identified with the word, be it understood as the text of the *Torah* or the logos which is embodied. Even if we do not necessarily confer a semantic function to the space of religious experience, this space is impregnated with conditionings imposed by the language, due to the dialogic structure of the word. This conditioning is manifested both on the macrostructural level of the religious discourse (the totality of religious images and allegories) as well as on the level of certain common modalities of theophany (archetypes). It is only the fabric under all these decorations of the divine in the world which differs.

¹ Henry Ey, *Conștiința (Conscience)*, Ed. Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1983, p.40 and the following.

The revelation of the divinity through the symbolic structures of the median space of religious experience not only eliminates the possibility of man experiencing the tragedy of finding himself alone in the heart of the absolute incognoscibility but it also initiates him into a synergic act of a continuous re-signification of his being. The syntagm “man is created in God’s likeness” is often correlated with the attributes of the divinity. There were thinkers who identified this “likeness” with one of the divine attributes. However, we think that in order to achieve similarity we must deconstruct the seal of a unique attribute and totalise divine attributes on a human scale in order to surpass (deconstruct) them as totality. We must pass from the anthropomorphisation of the divine to the apophantisation of the human into God, associating the tendency towards similarity with “deification” as a homologue of the “inaccessible” and “deity”.

Human identity is doubly defined by the mode in which divinity reveals itself and the structures by which man perceives and models it. The meanings given to the divinity by man are the most refined synthesis of the way in which the human being is able to reveal itself. It is not only the divinity which reveals itself to the symbolic conscience but man also brings into existence the mystery of his being by integrating himself into the revealed image of divinity.

The anthropological value of symbolic structures does not consist only in the fact that they reveal divinity in the field of accessibility of the mystery of its manifestations, but also in the force of transcending which they use. The act of symbolisation is a fundamental act of transcending the human being, a transcendence which circumscribes transcendence by multiplying to infinity the acts of symbolisation.

The median space of religious experience highlights the tendency of the divinity to confound himself with the totality of the world in the act of revelation through analogies and structures of the created world. At the same time, man is approaching the divinity through successive negations, by the continuous negation of all that exists. Even if complete apophysis is impossible, just as complete cataphysis is not possible, the median space of religious

experience presents us with an evidence: God amplifies his presence in the world through positive revelation while man amplifies the presence of God through negative revelation. The universe of religious representation can only be understood by taking into account the similar structure of the three levels inherent in the median space of religious experience and the religious discourse therefore: metaphysics, theology and experience.

The theological as well as the metaphysical dimension are subject to the order of the imaginary (even if in different degrees). The first lacks concreteness while the second lacks inconcreteness; the first fills immanence with transcendence, the second empties the principle (the being) of immanence. The metaphysical dimension tries to deconstruct the enthusiasm of a perspective which is tempted to relate (incorporate even) the transcendent to the immanent through the abstractions which the human mind allows for. The theological dimension favours the tendency of answering fundamental questions about the sense of being by the attempt to make transcendence accessible, bringing it close to man and the image of man which includes all the spheres and games of the imaginary. Thus theology rationally amplifies the elements of accentuated irrationality in revelation.

The dimension of experience allows the passage from the strictly devotional, cultural activity to the sacralisation of the various forms of the quotidian. Man gains the power of freeing himself from the oppression of the unknowable through religious experience, asking himself important questions about his being and finding answers in the fabric of his world, answers which make accessible and familiar the hidden “devourer” of the inaccessible. Man’s image of the divinity gives him the pattern of his own image. The imaginary focussed on God has profound repercussions on individual life and on the meanings of the passage of man from this world towards another world. Man continually structures and restructures his own identity. In a synergic movement, he redefines himself while structuring the image of the divinity and the divinity reveals itself in order to achieve an authentic structuring of the human. In this theandric work the human being becomes conscious that the personal destiny of the

divinity is closely linked to his own destiny. Therefore he tries hard to multiply to infinity the symbolic forms through which he makes the divinity present, saving himself from the neurosis of his inevitable dissolving in death or in the formless structure of a silent ocean.

Man is conscious of the fact that the more mediating factors are there in experiencing the divine the greater is the richness of significance, therefore he passes from the representation of an abstract principle to a personalised spirit which he brings into existence according to the fundamental characteristics of the universe in which we should live.

2. The relativity of symbolisation in Judaic religious imaginary

In Judaism, the knowledge of God can only be relative. The Zohar asserts textually: “the glory of God... is so sublime and above human understanding that it remains a secret for ever”. Although the Zohar rejects imagism and idolatrous tendencies, it allows openings towards the structures of the imaginary of every individual, in function of the spiritual level that they have attained. God makes himself known “at the gate”, that is, according to human categories and the understanding of every individual. All these images are valid only if he who assumes the responsibility of deepening the knowledge of God is conscious of the relativity of every image and every knowledge and only if he tries to comprehend, starting from the pre-comprehensive conditioning according to which the knowledge of the divine essence was not attained and cannot be attained.¹ The symbolic function can only be performed if we accept this negative conscience of the divine as a possibility condition for every positivation.

The knowledge of God does not imply partial and exterior proofs of his existence because “for the man of the *cabbala* God is beyond every mathematic or formal demonstration, and also beyond the usual experimental checking”.² God is conceived in

¹ *Zoharul (The Zohar)*, I, 103a, 103b, Ed. Antet, București, s.a., p.14.

² Alexandru Șafran, *Cabala*, Ed. Univers Enciclopedic, București, 1996, p.229.

terms of a negative theology. There is no need to look for partial proofs of his being because he is above existence. He is not conditioned by existence, moreover, the attribute of existence is unsuitable for him. But in spite of the hidden nature of his being, God does not cease to pour his mystery as an answer to man's search who although cannot know him in depth, is able to sense the mystery of God who comes closer and goes away depending on the contemplative level attained assiduously by the Godseeker.

In the spirit of a negative theology the terms which we can find in the *Talmud* express manifestations, not the divine essence. Lévinas observes that despite the radical Judaic monotheism the Hebrew language does not have a generic word for God, or a word which would designate some divine species but uses divine names considered to be proper nouns. For example, the use of the syntagm "Sacred, hallowed be his name" shows that sacredness evokes separation first of all, that is, it designates a mode of being or, more precisely, something "beyond being".¹ In the commentaries of A. Chouraqui on Kaufmann² we can read that saintness in the vision of Israel is something similar to philosophical abstraction in Greek thought. Saintness as a mode of being highlights transcendency which is irreducible to the mythological formulas of divine manifestation. It is the sign of difference which makes substantial the quasi-identical regime of humanity which rises to the formula of archetypal abstraction, filling it with the contents of his own life.

Lévinas draws a distinction between the proper name and the noun-attributes by which we speak about the divinity. These latter incorporate the essence of the reality to which they refer. We can see that the positive elements by which man approaches the Divinity, by reference to the category of the finite and immanent, are also the elements which estrange us from God who "cannot be represented and is sacred, that is, absolute, beyond any

¹ Emmanuel Lévinas, *L'au-delà du verset. Lectures et discours talmudique*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1982, pp.147 and the following.

² André Chouraqui, *La pensée juive*, P.U.F, Paris, 1989, p.16.

thematization and essence.”¹ According to Lévinas, it is necessary to remain in the sphere of a negative theology which uses proper names. The above distinction helps us to assess the character of modality of divine attributes and make a distinction between appearance and essence, a distinction through which the transcendence of what is manifested is preserved.

Lévinas maintains that proper names have a special nature and observes that besides the strange condition for a name that it should never be pronounced, there is also the interdiction to erase the proper name. The divine names which belong to a positivation of the Divinity because of a need for a cataphatic knowledge can be erased, but names which refer to his transcendence which we recognize only in the ambiguity of manifestation, cannot be erased. This interdiction implies the special situs of the knowing subject who, in his quality of theophanic being becomes the depository of transcendence as well as of the immanentisation of the divinity. Lévinas says that the name which is the Tetragram has in its turn a name: Adonai. The fact that “the name has a name” suggests that “the name is shown and dissembled” at the same time. Proper names have a different relation with the designated reality than common names delimited by the system of language. Proper names are specific to negative theology because no matter how close they are to the reality that they denote, they do not have any intrinsic logical relation with this, despite of any relevant proximity. The name “is an empty shell, like a permanent dismissal of that which evokes, a de-incarnation of that which is incarnated by it. Through the interdiction on uttering, it remains in this interval: the Tetragram which is never uttered although it is written.”²

Understanding this situation, man becomes conscious of the limits imposed by “his own not knowing”. He becomes conscious that the divine mystery remains inaccessible for him and then realises that in fact this mystery is clarity and bright light that can be contemplated without love only from a distance, and thus he

¹ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Idem*, p.148.

² *Ibidem*, p. 150.

confines himself to experiencing that which he wants to see but cannot see. Thus, negative knowledge is an opening towards theognosis. Alexandru Şafran cites a master of Hasidism who says: "...when I stay at a distance, God manifests himself to me and when it seems to me that God shows himself then I am farther away from Him than ever."¹ However, this distance does not mean separation. In spite of his hiding God is not perceived as absent because he takes the initiative in the encounter with man, so that "the *Ayin*, the No, the Non-spatial, Non-temporal, Non-personal is transformed into a Yes, capable of answering man who addresses him."² This is how the author thinks we can explain the passage of God from the quality of *Ayin* as divine essence imperceivable through intellect to the quality of *Aniy* (*I*) which, although it does not abandon himself to human understanding, enriches the human being which ascends towards the experiencing of the divine Self in a mystical partnership.

A particular image of such a partnership can be highlighted with the help of the analyses of Mosche Idel who considers the *Sefirot* a series of intermediary states between the Principle of emanation and all the existing things depending on God. The *Sefirot* are median entities which allow the manifestation of *En-Sof*. They are spiritual and symbolic entities which have a hidden dimension but it is exactly the revelation, formation and modelling of a median space of religious experience which is determinant for them.³ In his commentaries on Hasidism Moshe Idel evidences a correlation between the state of humbleness assumed by the religious man and the concept of *Ayin* as a symbol of the highest sefirot, *Kether*. He finds this correlation in relation with the divinity in the assertions of Moise Cordovero according to which those who reach the state of humbleness, *Anavim*, are within *Ayin*, whereas the others are only in *Aniy*. The author remarks here the distinction between those who can reach the divine Nothing re-

¹ Alexandru Şafran, *Cabala*, p. 261.

² *Ibidem*, p. 268.

³ Moshe Idel, *Kabbala. New Perspectives*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1988, p.232.

presented by the first Sefirot, *Kether* and those who belong to the last Sefirot, *Malkut*. There is a median space of the experience of spiritual ascension between the two Sefirot; the first step is when the human being becomes aware of his state of insignificance (in the Biblical sense of the word), his humbleness and nothingness.

Moshe Idel invokes a talmudic conversation in which Rabbi Abbahu is quoted, a conversation which shows that the world exists only for the sake of he who comes to consider himself as “nonexistent”. In order to throw light on the sense of this individual “nothingness” Moshe Idel writes a commentary on the words of Rabbi Yohanan which says that the *Torah* exists only for he who considers himself “nonexistent”, a state which can be expressed by the word *Ayin*. Moshe Idel says that formulations of this type are able to convince us that *Ayin* can designate the spiritual state of the elected who play a special role as masters of the *Torah* as well as supporters of the world¹.

The possible similarity between *Ayin* as divine essence and *Ayin* as entity opens a symbolic space of religious experience in which there is a human attitude of *imitatio dei*. According to some of the authors commented by Moshe Idel this *imitatio dei* may explain why the “nonexistence” of the individual is better than his existence. According to Moise Cordovero, *Kether* is the first divine attribute which sees itself as nothing (*Ayin*) as compared to him from whom he emanates. The first Sefirot recognizes his dependence and insignificance in his aspiration towards receiving the power of the Infinite. Rabbi Elijah de Vidas, a disciple of Cordovero describes how the first Sefirot submits himself to the Infinite Source from which it emanates and considers himself *Ayin* (Nothing) when he compares himself with him from whom he emanates. But the submission of *Kether* is not only a gesture of devotion towards the superior entity but *Kether* also leans to guard and emanate the inferior worlds.²

¹ Moshe Idel, *Hasidism Between Ecstasy and Magic*, State Univesroty of New York Press, Albany, 1995, p.109.

² *Ibidem*, p. 110.

We must mention those two ways of human self-perfectioning presented by Brian Lancaster: the development of humility through behaviour and the way of reaching “insignificance” proper by concentration upon the deep interior. In order to help us imagine the two ways the author represents man as a circle the circumference and centre of which condition and model each other reciprocally. Thus, the behavioural manifestation of humility acts on the circumference and brings man in the proximity of his fellow creatures and the landscape of the exterior world whereas the way of mystic interiorisation acts like a centre in which the human being finds his essence.¹

In the process of *imitatio dei* the human being which considers himself as nothing (*Ayin*) that is, not finding in himself values apart from the valorisation given by his relation with the Creative Reality, the human being transforms his “non-existence” in a superior form of existence. Reverting to a series of subtextual connotations Moshe Idel reaches the conclusion that in the tradition of the Cabbala, gaining the conscience of non-existence does not mean a disappearance or annihilation of the value of humanity. Just as Kether does not disappear when he identifies with *Ayin*, man who gains the state of the greatest humility does not lose his identity but attains a better significance of his own reality and a better understanding of the absolute difference of the individual as compared to superior entities. The author shows that in the imitation of the divine Nothing the mystic pushes away the limits of his self in an act of transcending in which he does not only extend his mundane and usual conscience but also increases his spiritual capacity in order to receive always renewed divine powers and contents².

We must underline that the discussion about the significance of the conscience of “non-existence” is not a secondary one from the point of view of our subject matter. We must make it clear that it does not refer to the idea of annihilation but rather to an

¹ Brian Lancaster, *Elemente de Iudaism (Elements of Judaism)*, București, 1995, p.87-88.

² Moshe Idel, *Idem*, p.111.

intensification of the importance of the median space of religious experience; it underlines the ontological difference between man and the superior entities in an emanationist system which seems to attenuate the importance of a median space.

Şafran underlines that Judaic mysticism just like the other rabbinical and Jewish philosophical doctrines does not aim at a theology or cosmology because it does not want to be a science of universal laws or a science of divine essence. Being conscious of the impossibility of such a science, the author directs our attention towards the act of divine creation and the relationship between God and man as the centre of the whole creation. Placing such a relation in the centre of *Cabbala* Şafran links the existence of God to the existence of man. However, such an interpretation does not lead him towards an anthropocentric vision. He speaks in metaphysical terms. In his vision God exists as a unique God only in the act of creation; in the pre-creational stage we can only speak about a “Deity”, a “divine Infinity” or “divine Nothing” which is an invisible, unknowable reality for the human being. It is only with the appearance of alterity that he comes out of passivity, ineffable existence, existence which hides itself. Despite the negative terms by which the divinity is presented we must not think about a negation of existence, because *Ayin* (*Nothing*) in the *Cabbala* is the assertion of the completeness of life; it is the essence of Being and of Reality”¹. André Chouraqui points out that with a cabbalist this nothing becomes “the most profound aspect of the reality of God” which is “expressed in the form of a plurality of divine entities”² in the act of creation. Thus the *Cabbala* “subordinates existence to nonexistence. In the *Cabbala* nonexistence is the active source of existence. Being appears in existence but it does not change the structure of nonexistence, despite of its passing from unity to plurality.”³

¹ Alexandru Şafran, *Idem*, p.301.

² André Chouraqui, *Idem*, p.95.

³ Alexandru Şafran, *Idem*, p.302.

3.The personalisation of the unknowable in Eastern Christianity

The unknowable enters the theological conscience of Christianity through mystical theology. In the opening part of the treatise *On mystical theology* Dionysius the Areopagite adopts a doxological attitude and reveals us that the simple and absolute mysteries of theology are covered in the “secretly hidden darkness” showing themselves in a superluminous way for those initiated and hiddenly penetrating the world of those who have not yet gained the power to see what is beyond the sensible and intelligible things. Gaining an insight into the world of the “Trinity above being” is described by Dionysius as a coming out of the self and ceasing dependence on exterior things. Such a coming out of the self strengthened by the preoccupation for the super-natural can assure ascension to “the brightness of divine darkness”.¹

At the same time, his thought presents the image of a transcendent, unknowable God who nevertheless descends to the human being drawn into the search of the divine, making himself accessible in a variety of works and symbolic structures, fully revealed by the text of the scriptures. Andrew Louth underlines the fact that with Dionysius “the symbolic language of the Bible hides the inner understanding from the simply curious and offers images that we can understand and use in our way towards God.”²

In the third paragraph of the second chapter of *The Celestial Hierarchy*, Dionysius distinguishes in the symbolic language of the Bible two types of creation: formations of similar forms and formations of non-similar forms. The “secret teachings of the scriptures” use similar symbols when they speak about God above all being in the simplest cataphatic terms: word, mind, being, light, life, etc, being conscious at the same time that all the positive attributes and all the “sacred semblances” are merely distant

¹ Dionisie Areopagitul, *Despre teologia mistică (The Mystical Theology)*, I, 1, in: *Opere complete (Complete Works)*, Ed. Paideia, București, 1996, p.247.

² Andrew Louth, *Dionisie Areopagitul. O introducere (Dionysius the Areopagite. An Introduction)*, Ed. Deisis, Sibiu, 1997, p.80.

likenesses of a being who “is above all being and life and no light can characterise him”¹. Otherwise, Dionysius says clearly that non-similar symbols are most specific to the divinity.

Saint Maximus the Confessor underlines in the *Scholia* on Dionysius the Areopagite that the description of God as unseen and infinite does not show what God is but what he is not. Similarly, when we say about the infinity above all being that it is “incomprehensible”, underlining thus the undefinable nature of God, we mean that God is “the definition of all; defining everything and delimiting everything in its Self, without him being subject to definition; definitions are composed of assertions (cataphatic declarations) and the assertions about God are inappropriate and mendacious, because God is above these as he is not a being but is above being”². The explanatory notes of Father Stăniloae to the passages in question invoke a series of mediations by a hierarchy of angels which open towards humanity only through the mediation of a “descent” in material forms and symbols which can be grasped by the human mind. They acquire faces which do not belong to them, but which give proof of their spiritual existence.

In the vision of Dionysius all the faces (semblances) conferred by the discursive thought are more or less inadequate. The less they share the likeness of God, the more God raises us to Him”. Dumitru Stăniloae considers that the impossibility of doing away with positive attributes taken from the concrete structures of the world also shows the interior relation between spiritual realities and symbolic forms. The author invokes the theophanic image of creation and of man, especially. It is not only God who can be considered a mystery but the human being is also “an unexplainable mystery”. Enlightening himself and ridding his subtle forms of the dead weight of worldly contents, man becomes a light of the divine mystery which is manifested in him³.

¹ *Despre Ierarhia cerească (The Celestial Hierarchy)*, in: *Opere complete*, p.17.

² Saint Maximus the Confessor, *Scolii la “Despre Ierarhia Cerească” (Scholia)*, p.43.

³ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Note la “Despre Ierarhia Cerească” (Notes to Celestial Hierarchy)*, p.63.

We can deduce that man in his quality of image of God can be understood as the likeness of the infinity of the Divine mystery. In other words, man is a mystery of creation which becomes decypherable only when it is integrated by an explanatory system which makes use of the language of reciprocity, the symbolic structures through which the hidden mystery of God opens up to the theophanic mystery of the human being. The archetype of the Mystery undefined in itself takes on successive faces and establishes a median space of religious experience using either “similar” symbols or “non-similar” symbols, depending on the forms which the mystery of the being “in the likeness of God” reveals in its most proper way.

In order to explain what is beyond that which can be contemplated through symbolic thought, St Maximus the Confessor reverts in his discourse (in the Scholia to Chapter I of the *The Mystical Theology* of Dionysius) to two Biblical passages: “Clouds and thick darkness surround him” (Psalms, 97.2) and “He made darkness his covering” (Psalms, 18.11). The reflections on God as nonexistent must be interpreted in the light of these. The existent are viewed in the light of the world and reason whereas the nonexistent are beyond every relation and covered by the brightness of the dark. The author “called the complete non-comprehension (non-understanding) darkness.”¹

In the analyses of Yannaras, positive and negative knowledge work together because, on the one hand, it is only the harmonisation of a theological apophatism with an analogic iconism that allows us to understand how “the ineffable is interwoven with the expressible” and, on the other hand, the exclusion of affirmative definitions would lead to the transformation of the apophatism into a simple negation, that is, a theological agnosticism. However, the apophatism of Eastern Christianity finds its accomplishment in the rejection of every stiffening of knowledge in conceptual determinations and the opening towards an existential dynamics of the

¹ Saint Maximus the Confessor, *Idem*, p.251.

individual.¹ From such a point of view it is clear for Yannaras that the formulation regarding the nonexistence of God is not a contesting of the existence of God but only an underlining of the necessity to go beyond the linguistic limits and to valorise them in an iconic sense. The nothing in theological apophatism does not only determine the ultimate cognition of God but also underlines the difference between the existence of man and the existence of divinity towards which man aspires and, similarly, marks the distance between human essence and divine essence, the created existence of man and the non-created existence of God².

The way in which nonexistence is superior to existence, darkness to light, non-knowledge to knowledge, etc., can be understood as a surpassing of the latter as compared to their usual conception. The words of Dionysius are edifying in this respect: “it is not part of those which exist and cannot be recognised in something that exists. It is everything in everything and nothing in nothing, and it is known by everybody in everything and by nobody in nothing.”³

The teaching about “darkness beyond light” (the super-luminous) gains a new and profound significance with the development of the distinction between the being of God and the divine energies by St Gregory Palamas, a teaching which is cautiously formulated in the majority of the works of Eastern Christianity. According to Palamas “there are three things in God: the being, the energy and the divine hypostases of the Trinity”. Going beyond the state of apophatic conscience, the initiate reaches theognosis, the seeing of divine light and unity with God. The human being cannot be united with God through the being, because this latter means a “divine darkness” and it is completely inaccessible for him. Neither can he be united with God through the hypostases because hypostatical unity is reserved by

¹ Christos Yannaras, *Heidegger și Areopagitul (Heidegger and the Areopagite)*, Ed. Anastasia, București, 1996, pp. 78 and the following.

² *Ibidem*, p.98.

³ Dionisie Areopagitul, *Despre Numirile Dumnezeuiești (The Divine Names)*, in: *Opere complete*, p.164.

theologians to the Logos only, which is the God-man. However, the human being can be united with God through the energy.¹

Nevertheless, one of the archetypes of Christian initiation is the ascension of Moses to Mount Sinai. This was an ascension through the visible and Moses was purified of all the conditions of the symbolic world of the sacred. Surpassing them he reached a superior zone of revelation but he could still not see God, only “the place where he stood”. In other words, he entered the “darkness of ignorance” which ensured him the access to the “superluminous darkness”. To see and to really know means in Dionysius’ vision “to see and know by not seeing and not knowing which is above seeing and knowledge as it cannot be seen or known”.²

Reaching the highest steps the only rational notion that could be formulated is that God is unknowable. Apophatism with Lossky does not mean a recourse to abstract and intellectual theology which leads towards a void, a divine nothing. Negative theology is not a theology which introduces the issue of divine unknowability, but an existential attitude in which man lives the transfiguration of his own person, because the way of knowing God is the way of deification, of meeting the living God conceived as Holy Trinity³.

Obviously, we are not so much interested in the boundary religious experience as the experiencing of God but the sense of apophatic knowledge attained in the light of texts dealing with theognosis. Thus we can assert that there are three approaches: the metaphysical, the theological and the mystical.

Metaphysical interpretation resorts to a distinction between the being of God and the divine energies. This does not mean a duality in divinity but the assertion of both the knowable and unknowable nature of divinity. Therefore the being of God appears as an *in itself* which cannot be known, as a “divine nothing” which is in complete hiding. This Impenetrable is known through the energies

¹ Grigorie Palama, *Tomul Aghioritic (Hagioritic Tome)*, in: *Filocalia (Philokalia)*, vol.VII, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al B.O.R, București, 1977, p.476.

² Dionisie Areopagitul, *Despre teologia mistică (The Mystical Theology)*, I, II, in: *Opere complete (Complete Works)*, p.248.

³ Vladimir Lossky, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit (The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church)*, Ed. Anastasia, București, s.a., p.67.

emanating from it. The divine energies mediate man's access to the completely unknowable. They play the role of the median space of religious experience and are configured at the same time as a series of divine attributes established as facts of the revelation of the divine in the sphere of the human. In this way the divine darkness becomes the supernatural light experienced by mystics in their union with the energies emanated by the divine being which is above every datum of existence.

Theological thinking rejects the idea that being precedes the hypostases of being. In Eastern theological thought the unity in God is given not so much by the existence of a common being of the hypostases but by the central place of the person of the Father in the Holy Trinity. In this case, the distinction between the being of God and the divine energies is made by distinguishing between what is God in itself and the way God reveals itself through his works in the world. However, the stress is on a cataphatic theology of the divine iconology in which God gives himself in a supernatural way as a totality of his being. The borderline between the being and the energies is not guarded by the need of assertion of the Unknowable but rather the need to underline the ontological difference between creator and creature, on the one hand, and between the mode of being of the divinity in itself and the mode of being of God for people, on the other hand.

The mystical perspective is relevant in the present discussion especially as a liturgical interpretation. Despite our expectation that a mysticism of the divinity should lead us to an extreme apophysis with a stress on the median space of religious experience, there is an attempt to diminish and even eliminate that which normally appears as median space. The liturgical dimension ensures through the mystery of Eucharist an encounter and a "seeing without seeing", that is, experiencing Christ in the completeness of his reality. Those who are prepared to partake in the secret of Eucharist believe that they experience Christ directly and in an unmediated way which is an intimate experience of their inner life and of their communitarian-liturgical life at the same time. This theological perspective describes religious acts on the level of the median space of religious experience, also on account

of the simple fact that the human being can live “heaven on earth” because of the descent of Christ in the median space not a ravishment of man and his reception in the *perihoresis* of the Holy Trinity.

4. The median space and the issue of the Unknowable

The God of Judaism and Christianity is not an unknown God. He is revealed by the median space of religious experience as an unknowable God which occasions and invigorates any type of religious knowledge. In other words, the unknowable God is a universal agent who, far from inviting to agnosticism, urges a vast symbolic creation. However, such a creation keeps us far from identifying God by concepts such as the *nothing* or the *Being*, which can be found in the philosophical or theological discourse, because if we accept that on the level of metaphysics God is the *Being*, and in theology God is a *being*, in the religious experience of Judaism and Christianity we encounter a God represented as a *personal being*, extremely familiar, despite the fact that divine attributes such as permanence, non-temporality, imperceivability turn God into an “abstract object” as Western philosophy would call it.

Unlike the philosophical visions in which being is non-categorical and can be discussed only by examining the entity, we can show how the discourse must be moved away from God who is undetermined and unknowable, towards the level of the human being. In such a perspective man expresses God in the religious experience by expressing himself as a relative immanence which must give account of the absolute transcendence. At the same time we can say that God is the being which appears both as an absolute transcendence and as relative immanence. The undetermined and the non-discursive of the religions have as their basic characteristic the double tendency to elude any discursive form and to reveal themselves at the same time to inferior levels of anthropomorphisations.

Such a vision is incompatible with the idea that God is only a transcendental structure, that is, a structure of the human

conscience as with Jung or Freud, for example. This is why we give up an analysis of religious facts in view of the mechanisms offered by the study of conscience. True, we could push to the extreme the consequences of accepting the usual scheme of religious explanations which divide conscience into unconscious, conscious and transconscious and try to point out the role of each structure in this existential game. We could make correlations between the zone of the unknowable and of the unconscious, where the first one is brought through the transconscious and observe the continuous and imperceptible transfer of information between the two structures of conscience which fills with meaning the language taken over and transferred as a product of the psychic apparatus. Even assuming the risk of falling into psychologism, we could speculate that the unconscious on the level of the individual corresponds to the deepest layer of the divinity, relying on the fact that the deep unknown of our inner being corresponds to the divine unknown. But such estimations cannot throw light on the hidden mystery of Divinity.

We must always stress the transcendent conditioning of religious experience and show that what we conventionally call “the sacred” associated with the “Divine” is a transcendent structure but also transcendental on another level. The transcendent is the basic condition for the transcendental which is in itself a second (further) condition but which is “basic” for every religious experience and/or representation. Thus, religion as the theology of encounter (representation) and behaviour is formed through the experience of transcendence in the transcendental expressed in the language of images and human acts.

Judaic and Christian religious experience cannot be conceived without two convictions, first, that there is a reality outside us which goes beyond our mode of being, secondly, that there is a structure on the level of human being which makes possible the perception of these realities and the formation of a very nuanced relationship with them, from the most rudimentary forms of representation and communication to complex inter-personal relating.

Although the human being is created in the likeness of the unknowable God, the unknowability of man and the unknowability of God – premises of the need for meaning of existence – necessarily lead to the surpassing of the metaphysical vision (which can only reveal the nothing as the sense of being because the surpassing of being cannot be conceived by the common individual as a return to being) and the formulation of a specific theological conception. There can be no religion of the unknowable God because this universal operator functions only within the parameters of the human mind and the representations. Although God is unknowable, he has a role of transfiguring the life of the individual, when the space of religious experience opens the regime of representation.

Therefore a general presentation of any monotheistic religion must resort to the triad of metaphysics-theology-religious experience. The unity of this triad ensures the framework of a pure monotheism. Once discovered and theorised as autonomous entities, these three dimensions become de-stabilising factors of the grand monotheist edifice. Supreme knowledge in the metaphysical perspective appears as the introspection of the unknowable, while on the level of theology progress in knowledge means the shift from the perception of an impersonal force to a person which is more and more clearly outlined and anthropomorphised in religious experience. This shows the unity and difference of the three elements of the triad.

However, we cannot disregard the fact that the tradition of Abrahamic Religions separates the two aspects presupposed by the *coincidentia oppositorum* into two different principles. These principles function in a hierarchic system in which the elements which can be designated by the sphere of the positive are superior because they belong to the divine world and are absolute, while those which belong to the sphere of the negative, are subordinated and belong to the zone of the created or the relative. In the Abrahamic Religions, the ontological status of the divine is outlined only by attributes from the sphere of the positive, of the Good. The Evil is most often insubstantial, it is not a creation of the divine will. It is a volitional product of the created being who

acts freely. Naturally, we can bring as a counterargument the various scourges determined by Jahve on a historical level or the incompatibility between the Christian God of love and the God of judgement in an eschatological perspective, theological aspects which could only be explained if we would accept an image of the divinity which contains the opposite spheres which we conventionally designate here as positive and negative.

Such a legitimate provocation can be answered by the evidence that in view of the theologies in question these represent only actions of the divine described in the way man perceives them in his relation with the divinity. However, they do not belong to the mode of being of the divinity. This is in fact the problem of every theologian: to defend the sphere of the divine from every intrusion of the negative, the anti-value or, even more so, of non-value. The theologian is the keeper of a system of values founded by the Unknowable who is the guarantee of religious value situated somewhere at the interference of the transcendent and historical life modelled by the individual and collective imaginary.

The experience of Abrahamic Religions compels the researcher to choose from two alternatives: theorising the non-sacral nature of these monotheisms or accepting the monovalent nature of the assertion of the sacred in these religions. The non-sacral nature of these religions consists of their refusal of accepting the bipolarity of the sphere of the sacred and to explain the mode of being of the divinity as the unification of opposites. The monovalent nature of the transcendent sacred is given by the association of the ontological and the ethical in the mode of being of the divinity. This perspective clearly delimits the positive attributes identified with the mode of being of the divinity from the sphere of the negative which is an accidental appearance in the sphere of the created.

The monovalence of the sacred is identified with saintness on the level of the divine as well as of the human. The identity of sacred and saintness offers the image of an authentic monovalent religious experience which coincides with a restriction of the sphere of the sacred. However, the restriction of the sphere of the sacred does not correspond to a moment of secularisation in the

religious history of humanity. Secularisation is not implicit in this phenomenon because it is correlated with a series of mechanisms of totalising existence under the badge of the global manifestation of divinity. The restriction of the sphere of the sacred to saintness cannot be analysed in comparison with the modern forms of sacralisation created by the conscience of the non-ecclesiastic man, the infinite extension of the sphere of the sacred. Extrapolation is unpermitted in the religious spirit of Judeo-Christian doctrines, still, it is possible because of the privileged function of the human spirit in a cultural sense (the modern world favours the distinction between cultural and religious spirit) and because of the distinction between the sacred and the profane which functions in the mentality of the modern non-ecclesiastic man and through this, on account of the possible transgressions brought about by the dialectics of the sacred and the profane.

The modern man claims his access to the increase of meaning of the world. He searches for a new identity, not always a religious one, but a relational identity, capitalised as a multiple identity. He tends towards a holonic identity, required by the fact that man is of a hypostasised nature, even if he does not find himself a religious being. Autonomy in identity is determined by the fact that nature can only exist as a hypostasised nature. Man is looking for his realisation and discovers himself between these two determinations.

However, the ontological restriction of the sacred does not obstruct the recovery of the principle of harmonising the opposites in other registers of religious meditation. It is enough to mention the paradoxical nature of dogmatic formulas in Eastern Christianity. In Christianity which passed through the experience of Greek philosophy, there is a shift from the ontological coincidence of opposites to the logical coincidence of opposites. The coincidence of opposites is no longer manifested in the formula of positive or negative divinities depending on the context of religious experience or the face they reveal in a certain context, but it is concentrated in logical paradoxes which try to make accessible the transcendence of immanence or reunite (con-

centrate) the transcendence-immanence, the divine-human and the celestial-telluric in a unique formula.

Transcendence, at a global glimpse, is revealed through a continuous process of self-postponement, thus allowing for a continuous play of the human need for religious creation. Transcendence as a complete *datum* is always postponed, even when it comes to the highest intimacy of man through the Christian theandros, be it only through the transcendentalisation that the act of revelation brings about and presupposes. Therefore we can say that revelation is not only an act through which Transcendence is revealed to us but it is also a human act of sifting the surrealist reality through the filter of transcendentalising the transcendent.

We do not agree with the philosophical perspective according to which religion is only the progressively accomplished self-knowledge of God. Religion is also self-knowledge itself that is progressively accomplished by the individual in his attempt to approach the divine. Man is not only the agency through which God becomes conscious of himself as the Absolute Spirit. The epiphanisation of the world corresponds at the same time to a human need, also felt on the level of the divine, the need of man to accomplish himself as an integral humanity, an individual as well as a community being which assumes the divine mystery in order to recognise it by the symbolic means available to him.

The permanent hiding of the divinity is part of the mode of conceiving its being. This camouflaging is always suggested to us, and therefore language maintains its symbolic nature, and the symbolism of the language, which is anthropomorphised, is the guarantee of the secret of hiding. Concealing, we know, can only exist through revealing.

The unknowable God remains at the same time an ineffable universal operator, even if he is revealed in the icon of our minds. We refer to the *icon* as something which comes out of the perimeter of idolatry and enters that of ontological substance. The icon as an instrument of transcending was at first a language of the absent, a house in which the absent made itself present, urging us to dare it more and more to dwell.